

From rap to literature: creativity as a strategy of resistance in Portugal through the works by Telma TVon

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Abstract

The present work discusses rap and literature as a means of cultural resistance in postcolonial Portugal. I argue that, especially in the hands of Black women, these two different practices can become compelling platforms against different forms of power exploitation. In order to do this, I examine two works by rapper and writer Telma TVon: the album *Finalmente* (Dreamflow Records, 2005), recorded with soul singer and MC Geny under the name of Lweji, and her first novel, the recently-published *Um preto muito português* (Chiado Editora, 2018). In both works, creativity is cleverly handled to convey messages of revolt and resistance against racial and gender prejudice, social inequalities and injustice in its many different forms.

Keywords: female rappers; women writers; creativity; resistance; Portugal

1. Introduction

I had the opportunity and pleasure of meeting former (or “retired”, as she would say) rapper Telma TVon in 2017 on the occasion of an event I co-organised in Coimbra, with CES – Centro de Estudos Sociais (RAPensar as Ciências Sociais e a Política – Teatro da Cerca de São Bernardo, July 5-6, 2017) and within the framework of my research on Portuguese female rappers.¹ Telma was invited to the event and was part of the panel I coordinated, “Não vou cumprir com a p*ta da expectativa: o Feminismo e o Rap”, representing the second-wave of female voices who were taking part in the practice of rap made in Portugal.² Later, in order to help me with my research, Telma was generous enough to agree that I recorded our conversation about her experience as a rapper during the early and mid-2000s in Portugal. Our conversation took place in Lisbon on September 28,

2017. During our informal chat, Telma mentioned her deep love of writing from an early age. As she told me:

I have always loved writing. Since I was a child, I enjoyed writing, creating poems and a lot of letters [...]. Writing has always been everything to me (TVon, personal communication, September 2017).³

Together with her passion and urge to write, Telma always showed great awareness of the social, cultural and political struggle of living in Portugal as a Black woman. This appears in her works as a rapper, which often are built around themes such as racism, gender inequalities and women’s empowerment, as well as people coming together against power’s exploitation. It is unmistakable in her first work as a writer: Chiado Editora released a few months after our conversation, more precisely on February 10, 2018, Telma’s *Um preto muito português* [A very Portuguese nigger].⁴ The novel, which was born from what initially was meant to be

1 Born in Luanda, Angola, as Telma Marlise Escórcio da Silva, Telma then moved to Portugal with her family, who settled in Queluz, Lisbon. Her career in rap started with the group Backwordz (1996-2000), to continue with Hardcore Click, comprised of all the female MCs who were active in Lisbon between 2000 and 2002. With them and DJ Cruzfader, she recorded the album *RAParigas na Voz do Soul* (Riso Records, 2001). Finally, with soul singer and MC Geny she funded the group Lweji, who were active approximately until 2008. She published her first novel in 2018. Her name both as a rapper and a writer is Telma TVon. Therefore, I refer to her as Telma or just TVon, avoiding the use of her family name.

2 According to my research, I consider that the practice of rap made by women in Portugal has seen three main waves. The first one covers approximately the years between 1990 and 1998 with the groups Djamal and Divine; the second wave corresponds to the early and mid-2000s with the participation of a greater number of women (Telma TVon, Dama Bete, Blaya, Capicua and M7, Eva Rap

Diva and Red Chikas), while the third wave can be identified with the present times where we can witness the growth of the career of artists such as Capicua, Blaya and Eva Rap Diva, and the appearance of a large number of new ones: W Magic, Blink, A.m.o.r., Da Chick, Lady N., Mynda Guevara, Muleka XIII, Joana na Rap, Mary M., and RUSSA.

3 The conversation took place in Portuguese. All translations are mine unless otherwise mentioned.

4 The English version of the title is my translation. I chose to use the word “nigger” in order to offer a better perception to non-Portuguese speakers of the term “preto” [black] when referred to non-white people. In Portuguese, “preto” is considered offensive and politically incorrect, as well as openly racist, while “negro” is commonly accepted as a less harmful term. Despite the fact that the English term “nigger” is probably more offensive and charged with meanings than the Portuguese “preto,” I chose to use it in my translation in the attempt to reproduce what I believe was Telma’s play on the two Portuguese terms (preto/negro).

a lyric for a rap song, refers to the life experiences of João, best known as Budjurra, a son of Cape Verdeans living in Lisbon. The numerous episodes of injustice experienced by the protagonist for being a “pretuguês”, a “preto” and the word “português” meaning a Black Portuguese, triggered what the author refers to as the “need to get these things off my chest” (TVon 2018: 182) – a “desabafo”, in Portuguese – resulting in the book in analysis.

Hence, taking into consideration studies by Hall (1975), Hebdige (1979), Forman & Neal (2004), Contador (2001), Simões (2017), among others, in the present work I aim at discussing both rap and literature as creative strategies of resistance and emancipation for Black voices living in a postcolonial country. In order to do that, in the first part of this work I take a closer look into TVon’s contributions as a rapper, with particular attention to the album *Finalmente* (Dreamflow, 2005). In the second part I am focusing on Telma’s novel: being intimately connected to rap in terms of narrative strategies and content, I establish that it exposes racism as an endemic, yet painful, component of today’s Portuguese society from the point of view of a young, Black citizen.

2. From Rap

Telma’s need to creatively communicate showed up at quite a young age. Despite what one may think, what led her to join her first rap group – a group of four young MCs called Backwordz – was not her “flow” but her writing skills.⁵ Having joined the group around 1996 when still in high school, during our conversation Telma explained how the four MCs created their songs by cooperating in the writing process while sharing a deep love for rap. However, despite showcasing precocious creative skills, there was quite an “absence of a collective message” (TVon, personal communication, 2017), probably due to their young age and inexperience. However, this did not deter them from sharing the same concerns and needs, managing to stay united despite the tensions experienced when they performed in a male-dominated context: that of rap. In this perspective, I consider the choice of rap itself not only a response to a creative urge, that of writing, but also a strategy of emancipation and resistance: emancipation against the stigmatisation of women as subordinate actors and resistance to the oppression experienced by Black citizens during

their everyday life in Portugal. As a matter of fact, in Portugal, ideologies in line with the colonial narrative – in other words, those of Lusotropicalism and racial prejudice – persist relentlessly: on the one hand the country is often depicted as “a non-racist – and, in fact, anti-racist – society that overwhelmingly accepts diversity and hybridity” (Buettner 2016: 404), while on the other hand its non-white citizens still experience discrimination as well as social, cultural and economic struggles on a daily base.⁶

As many scholars have already pointed out (Rose 1994; Bennett 2001; Kitwana 2002; Price 2006) despite its first appearance as a party-oriented practice, rap soon evolved into a strategy of resistance against a condition of oppression and segregation experienced by young African-Americans and Latinos living in the margins of the cultural, economic and political capital, terms I borrow from Pierre Bourdieu. Thus, what can be considered young subalterns (Gramsci 1978; Said 1978; Spivak 1993) found their means of expression and protest through the creative process of combining rhythm and poetry. Rap continues to allow young people to express their dissatisfaction, and its longevity and global spread expose the extent to which the social condition of marginalisation is experienced worldwide (Bennett 2001: 189). In fact,

as a distinct element of hip-hop culture, it is the aesthetic bridge to a reaffirmed free speech. The form and its adherents engender conversation of resistance, spoken in the vernacular of young urban people (Chang 2006, 16).

During my interview with Telma in September 2017, she recalled that she was already a fan of North-American rap when she lived in Angola in the 1990s – Run DMC, Public Enemy, NWA, Queen Latifah, and MC Lyte being among the artists she mentioned to me. Once in Lisbon, she soon came in contact with Portuguese rap, found herself surrounded by friends who were either MCs or soul singers. In the late 1990s, the rap movement in Portugal was still about “union, unity, and community, about cultural issues and friends” (TVon, personal communication, 2017), sharing the need of creating new forms of identity in the diaspora (Buettner 2016):

United by socio-economic exclusion, limited prospects, spatial segregation, and the experience of racial discrimination in Portugal, African-descended

5 Backwordz consisted of four female MCs – Lady, LG, Zau and Tvon – who performed together between 1996 and 2000. They recorded in several mixtapes (by Dj Cruzfader and Bomberjack, for instance) and albums (Mc Xeg, Força Suprema, Bad Spirit, and Guardiões do Movimento Sagrado, among others).

6 With regards to this, Joana Gorjão Henriques’s book, *Racismo no país dos brancos costumes* (Tinta da China,

2018), undoes the persisting myth of the ‘Pais dos Brancos Costumes’ [the country of gentle habits], invented during the Estado Novo. Henrique plays with the words branco/brando [white/mild], and depicts true cases of racial discrimination, complementing them with statistical data and more than 80 interviews, covering justice, housing, education and employment.

youth born or brought up in Portugal converged across ethnic lines far more habitually than their parents, whose primary identification was more likely to be Cape Verdean, Mozambican, Angolan, or another country of origin (Buttner 2016, 408).

Hence, rap offered the Portuguese youth language they could identify with, as a means to protest against stigmas, racism and social rejection while affirming their pride in their ethnic heritage and cultural choices (409-410).

However, while racial discrimination and social inequality was fought both by male and female MCs, the female MCs also had to face another struggle: that of gender prejudice and machismo, inside and outside the hip hop community. As Isoke explains:

The exercise of power and dominance over black people does not end with racist, sexist white institutions, ideologies, and practices. It also extends to sexist, misogynist, homophobic, and colonial practices internal to the black community (Isoke 2013: 22)

As regards this, during our conversation Telma enumerated that, during various live performances, the group Backwordz was often targeted with sexist and detrimental remarks such as “you should be at home doing the washing-up” or “you’re not good at this,” and that she happened to witness various conversations where her male peers commented that female MCs wanted to be part of rap only because they were “looking for a boyfriend.” After acknowledging that female MCs tended to focus on attacking men rather than building a scene of their own, TVon began seeing rap as a potential channel of communication with and for other women, a means to empower them and encourage them to join the fight against power abuse in its various forms.

It is precisely with this intention that the project Lweji was born with MC and soul singer Geny. Their first and only album, *Finalmente* (Dreamflow Records, 2005) was created precisely to “educate men on women’s issues” while being “a voice for women” (TVon, personal communication, 2017). Indeed, the record is creatively built around delicate matters such as their right to self-determination, the weight of patriarchy and domestic violence, with the intention of destigmatising women from different forms of prejudice: “we sought to make a purely feminine album that women could hear and identify with, especially those women who were stigmatised” (TVon 2017). Perfectly in line with these intentions, in the album’s “Intro” (the first, short track) we can hear an excerpt of a conversation between two women where one clearly states “honestly, I wouldn’t want to have children” [sinceramente, eu não queria filhos]. As Meyers reminds us, “women who prefer not to have any children [...] are commonly reproached for selfishness or pitied for

immaturity” (Meyers 2002: 30). Hence, the choice of opening the album with such strong statement is at once provocative and an act of emancipation: indeed motherhood is a very personal choice, and the right to choose being childless should be respected as any other right of self-determination. While some listeners can relate to such statement, others may feel uncomfortable; yet, the choice to open their work with such excerpt tells us a lot about where the two MCs are coming from, and where they are going with their work.

Issues related to motherhood are again evoked in the song “A dúvida” [The Doubt], where abortion is discussed by different alternating voices, each representing a different point of view: starting with the pregnant girl’s doubts, fears and sorrows, the song then switches giving voice to a moralist and judgmental view about abortion, while closing with the boy’s invitation to “get rid of it”. The chorus, moreover, evokes the deep sense of loneliness and abandonment that accompanies the difficult decision of ending an unwanted pregnancy. By mentioning the Bible, condemning free sexual intercourse, and frequently stating that “abortion is a mistake”, the two MCs seem to be subtly exposing the patriarchal, moral and cultural grid that still limits women’s freedom of choice, mainly when it comes to their body.

In this sense, I agree with Durham, Cooper & Morris when they

see hip-hop feminism as a generationally specific articulation of feminist consciousness, epistemology, and politics rooted in the pioneering work of multiple generations of black feminists based in the United States and elsewhere in the diaspora but focused on questions and issues that grow out of the aesthetic and political prerogatives of hip-hop culture (Durham, Cooper & Morris 2013: 722).

Lweji’s album fits this profile: it touches women’s issues while also being about compassion, unity, freedom in general. But most importantly, it is a about revolt and resistance through the art of poetry, in the shape of music, with a very clear purpose: “to not be dominated without wishing to dominate others” (“Rebeldes Com Causa”, *Finalmente*, 2005). Thus, the album *Finalmente* can be seen as an attempt to create a space of engagement, “in which the impetus for radical and transformative political thought and action is sparked” (Isoke 2013: 19), in line with urban Black women’s traditions. Moreover, its content and narrative features correspond to what Williams points out about female poets, since “the female voice is often aligned with revolt [...]” (Williams 2007: 176).

Using narrative strategies that are often autobiographical and highly non-metaphorical, rap embodies a unique union between aesthetics and praxis (Shusterman 1995). Lweji’s album, then,

showcases rap not only as a means to express a sense of revolt against the establishment (Rebelde com Causa; Traficantes de Ódio; Essas Facetas dos Nossos Dias), but also as a means to resist to male hegemony (Entre Elas e Eles; As Invejosas; A Dúvida). In this case, then, “resistance entails more than just arguing, ‘talking back,’ or even overtly aggressive acts to subvert power structures” (Isoke 2013: 21), it entails using creativity to convey social consciousness, a message of unity and empowerment against power abuse, while exposing the limits of today’s postcolonial world.

3. To Literature

Some time has passed since Lweji’s album was released and since the band left the stage (2008). Lweji was Telma’s last ‘official’ project as a rapper, but not her last contribution as an artist, a thinker and a cultural activist. After completing a Bachelor’s course in African Studies, TVon graduated with a Master’s degree in Social Sciences. As she explained during our event in Coimbra, Telma is today more oriented towards social working rather than rapping; she continues to write but quitted recording: “today, I prefer to continue more underground than any metro you ever knew” (TVon 2017).⁷

Yet, as far as Telma is concerned, the fact that today, she works better out of the spotlight does not mean that she has stopped believing in the power of words as weapons of resistance, nor that she has changed focus as a social and cultural activist. In other words, she is still anchored in rap’s mentality in terms of themes, thinking and creative strategies, even if choosing a different channel to deliver them.

Indeed, through her first book as a writer - *Um preto muito português* (Chilado Editora, 2018) – Telma switches between prose and poetry in the building of a novel that is at once a diary, a monologue, careful critique and an emotional burst. Written in the first person, the narration is conducted by Budjorra, a young Black Portuguese, son of Cape Verdeans, who “was indeed born in Lisbon yet considered a foreigner. And not by my choice” (TVon 2018, 5). As a matter of fact, as we read we become aware of the numerous, hostile situations experienced by Budjorra for being a non-white Portuguese, and how this led him to question his identity as a mestizo born in the diaspora, as well as distrust “the land that had impartially given birth to me” (6). Throughout the 47 short chapters that compose the book, and thanks to a sophisticated use of irony and a hint of humour, the author unravels and criticises the racial, social and

cultural biases that affect Black lives in today’s Portugal.

Telma’s themes as a rapper are merged into this novel and Budjorra’s paradigmatic life: the fight against capitalism (“Call center licenciado, Budjorra”), the media’s manipulation of information (“Tu agora chamaste arrastão, Budjorra”), the need for more awareness and unity, as well as the call for more empathy and greater humanity, stronger moralities, and the peaceful coexistence of diversities (“Boa pessoa, Budjorra... Boa pessoa, Budjorra”). In addition to this, the book discusses a wide range of matters, going from politics in Africa (“Xê Budjorra, não fala política”), Black Power movements (“Desmistificar o Black Power”) and rage against injustice (“Tanta raiva, Budjorra”), to love, compassion and disillusion (“Não sabes nada sobre nada”). The attempt is to redeem those lives that share with Budjorra the fact that

books tell all stories but mine, the story of a Black Portuguese who fights with himself and with a large part of the Lusitanian society in order to feel just like a Human Being (115).

Telma TVon, hence, uses her novel as a platform to question both the human condition and the new post-colonial era, by giving a literary body to the thoughts, fears and frustrations of an individual whose life is, in fact, its product: one of those many “hyphenated identities”, a term I borrow from Inocência Mata (2006). As Kahn explains, these postcolonial subjects are

human, cultural and identity cartographies who carry the roots and the legacy of a long-lasting, crossbreeding relationship, of the sharing of symbolic territories, which are reproduced in language (Padilha 2005), food, music, art, and in literature itself (Padilha & Calafate 2008; Calafate & Meneses 2008) [...] (Kahn 2017: 98).

Hence, I consider Telma’s choice of Budjorra – a young individual who firmly believes “in equality among diversity” (9) – as the leading voice of the novel, an example of how literature, in the hands of Black authors, becomes a space of resistance against their assimilation and silencing. *Um preto muito português* gives voice to the hybrid identity (Hall 2006) of the Afro-Portuguese postcolonial subject:

Of course I am also Cape Verdean, my education, my values and principles say so, but of course I am also Portuguese, I was born here, I learned a lot here, and I also gained new values and principles, therefore, this duality to me is a treasure (TVon 2018: 10).

Telma’s literary work, then, can be observed as a step forward towards both the institutionalisation

⁷ The full video of our panel during the event in Coimbra, RApensando as Ciências Sociais e a Política, and of Telma’s intervention, is available at

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VZtrAlam_0&fbclid=IwAR2ynkwxITy1CpoMZIYh4wexCB5yTOKwVxBU6DI6-Bs4KISNMKL7BUj6t8.

of diversity and the negotiation of its cultural symbols and a contribution to the broadening (and enriching) of the scope of the Portuguese cultural identity (Mata 2014).

Moreover, in line with her works as a rapper, the novel is punctuated with some considerations of a feminist nature. In “Uma Budjurra, ou não, para o Budjurra”, for instance, the narrator describes himself as a compassionate man whose deepest desire is to experience love as “described in books, in soap operas, with butterflies in the stomach” (35). Budjurra is definitely a non-stereotyped man who is not afraid of expressing his feelings since these do not harm his masculinity and his nature finds full expression throughout the novel. Furthermore, the novel also discusses toxic relationships and women’s subordination to men. In “Ela, ele e eu, o Budjurra... No nosso silêncio”, the narrator unfolds the story between his friend Fernanda and Rui, the father of her son, a young man who had vanished after deluding her with all his promises. Since then, Fernanda had sunk into sadness, her face always covered by a veil of silence. Budjurra’s position is very clear with regards to the father’s narcissistic behaviour: “He is that kind man I will never endorse” and “this is not being a Man” (71). Through a surprising final, the chapter closes with Fernanda telling Budjurra that Rui had HIV, and both she and her son have contracted the virus, leaving the reader with a sense of revolt that inevitably leads to the questioning the legitimization of masculinity as hegemonic and subordinating.

Feminism is then broadly debated in “Budjurra, Carlos, Sandra e algumas mulheres”. The chapter, in fact, focuses on women’s empowerment as individuals and as a collectivity. In order to do this, Budjurra presents two interesting cases: that of his brother Carlos – a “womaniser” (75) – and that of his sister Sandra – “the most chauvinist woman I have ever known” (77). Both are examples of how macho behaviours affect both men and women indiscriminately. In the first case, male chauvinist culture translates into being promiscuous regardless of women’s feelings; in the latter, it takes the shape of hatred of women, by other women. The narrator uses both figures to discuss women’s tendency to act against each other, instead of working together as a powerful collectivity. In fact, for Budjurra, feminism is the only solution:

In some sense, I really like the feminists. I think that feminism is truly the right way to fight not only men’s unproven beliefs but women’s too. Nothing exaggerated, but a feminism strong enough to instil in some women that they won’t lose a leg or a hand if they praise other women in a heartfelt way or if they see in each woman a friend and not an enemy [...] (79).

As mentioned above, these are just a few examples of the feminist imprinting of the whole novel. Bearing this in mind I consider that *Um preto muito português* showcases a creative use of literature as a platform where hegemonic narratives are disclosed and undone, these being racisms, capitalism, patriarchy or power relations in general. By exposing how deeply discriminating they are, the novel contributes to the building of new, alternative narratives as strategies of resistance, as spaces of creation where blackness and femininity are presented as strong identity pillars. Budjurra’s words as exemplary, as follows:

I am Carlos do Carmo remixed with Cesária Évora, that became a track by Boss AC. I am about Portugal’s existence as much as I am about the search for Cape Verde. [...] I am a man, a man that doesn’t feel it is necessary for him to stand up for his masculinity and I am this same man who feels necessary to claim his blackness (182).

4. Final considerations

As I have previously stated here, I believe that the works of Telma TVon showcase a similar use of rap and literature as means of cultural resistance against hegemonic narratives. What I would like to add as a final consideration, is that by creating a space for those subjects that history tends to silence, TVon’s contributions provide new cultural references to a heterogeneous cohort of voices who are fighting for their expression. More importantly, they stir the debate on the need to renew the (static) categories that define what (and who) is Portuguese and what (and who) is not. I agree with Fernando Arenas when he explains that today:

Cinema, literary fiction, and popular music, [...] are providing a key platform for the symbolic representation and socio-political empowerment of marginalized African and Afro-Portuguese communities, as well as a prism through which to posit a multiplicity of shifting, and at times, overlapping identity formations ranging from static binary categories such as foreign/national, black/white, African/European as well as localized, situational, and/or hyphenated identities (Arenas 2012: 167).

From rap to literature, Telma TVon’s works prove that, in Portugal, creativity can be deployed as a strategic way to discuss and undo cultural, social, and racial categories that delegitimise heterogeneity and equality as necessary elements for the building of a free world.

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